DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 417 007 PS 026 305

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TITLE The Identification of Maladaptive Coping Strategies Exhibited by Elementary School Students Raised in Single Care-Giver Homes.
PUB DATE 1997-11-00
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (Memphis, TN, November 11-14, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Aggression; Anxiety; Attention; Behavior Problems; Children; Comparative Analysis; *Coping; *Elementary School Students; Emotional Adjustment; *Family Structure; Intermediate Grades; Nuclear Family; One Parent Family; Preadolescents; Student Adjustment
IDENTIFIERS Externalization; Internalization; Strategy Choice

ABSTRACT

This study compared the coping strategies used by children residing with single caregivers to those used by children residing with dual caregivers. Participating were 30 children in grades 4 through 6: 15 children living in families with 1 adult present and 15 children living in families with at least 2 adults present. Measures of anxiety, attention, aggression, externalization, and internalization were obtained by means of the Child Behavior Checklist, based on daily classroom observations of behavior and coping strategies that were recorded in journal entries. The results indicated that students from single caregiver families had more problems in the areas of attention and exhibited more aggression and externalization of behaviors than students from dual caregiver families. There were no differences between the two groups in terms of anxiety and internalization. (KB)

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THE IDENTIFICATION OF MALADAPTIVE COPING STRATEGIES EXHIBITED BY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS RAISED IN SINGLE CARE-GIVER HOMES.

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PAPER PRESENTED AT THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF MID-SOUTH EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE. NOVEMBER 11-14, 1997

PS 026305

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the various coping strategies used by elementary school students residing with a single or dual care-giver in the home. Single care-givers consisted of only one adult living in the home with the child, while dual care-givers consisted of at least two adults in the home with the child. Measures of anxiety, attention, aggression, externalization, and internalization were obtained from a sample of thirty students in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades. The "Child Behavior Checklist" developed by the Child Study Center, University of Vermont was used to determine these behaviors. The checklists were compiled for fifteen students living with a single care-giver, and fifteen students living with dual care-givers. Measures of Central Tendency, Measures of Dispersion, ANOVA, and T-Tests for Independent Means were used to analyze the data. Significant differences were found in the areas of attention, aggression, and externalization of behaviors. No significant differences were found in internalization and anxiety behaviors.

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Introduction

Children growing up in the United States today are faced with many different issues than previous generations. The organization of families has changed dramatically due to the proportions of single mothers and divorced homes. It is estimated that 45 percent of all children born since 1970 will experience an average of six childhood years in a single-parent home as a consequence of divorce (Hetherington, 1989). In 1990, only 58% of children were living in "traditional" families with both biological parents (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992b). Between 1970 and 1991, the proportion of children maintained by a single parent, usually the mother only, jumped from 11% to 22% (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1992), and it is estimated that about half of all children will spend some time in a household headed by a female parent.

Several findings from many longitudinal studies (Hetherington, 1989; Wallerstein, 1991), suggest that children invariably experience acute negative reactions in post divorce adaptation; that the nature and course of adaptation to family transition vary according to individual, parental, and environmental factors; and that approximately one-third of children who have experienced the divorce process report long-term psychological difficulties. Literature is replete with evidence suggesting that there is a difference in students academic self-efficacy in comparison to their peers from intact homes (Kurt & Derevensky, in press-a).

Investigators have increasingly turned to stress and coping theory (Lazarus, 1984), particularly the work of Garmezky and Rutter (1983) and Rutter (1988), as a theoretical framework to research. According to Compas (1991), "coping mechanisms" (i.e., resources and efforts) may be conceptualized as those intentional cognitive and behavioral responses one uses to deal with situational stressors, such as a parental divorce. Psychological coping resources include those personal characteristics which

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are influential when faced with a stressful life event (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping styles are defined as strategies an individual develops and uses when faced with stress-inducing circumstances. Children's behavioral problems subsequent to parental divorce may be a result of maladaptive strategies used in an effort to cope with changes in lifestyles and parent-child relationships following a divorce.

Specific knowledge of children's classroom coping strategies may provide important information for the development of teacher implemented individualized student programs to reduce the inefficient coping styles within the classroom setting. Teachers that are aware of maladaptive coping styles have many opportunities to help decrease the social stigma, rejection, and negative attitudes often associated with students from "broken homes."

Method

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of thirty students who attended the social studies and language arts classes taught by the reseacher. The fourth, fifth, and sixth grades were equally represented in this sample, with ages ranging from 10 to 13 years. Fifteen students were from dual care-giver homes, and fifteen resided with a single care-giver.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

Daily classroom observations of behaviors and coping strategies were noted and recorded by the researcher in journal entries. The researcher used the "Child Behavior Checklist" (CBCL), (Achenbach & Edebrock, 1983), to record individual behaviors at the conclusion of the study. Permission was obtained from the Child Study Center, University of Vermont, and the researcher purchased the checklists and profiler from the center to use in this study. The researcher observed the students in the sample for a three month period, and student

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checklists from single care-giver homes were compared with checklists of students that lived with two care-givers.

Analysis

Data analysis focused on measures of central tendency and measures of dispersion. T-tests for independent means and one way ANOVA were also used to analyze the data.

Results

The following research questions served to guide the analysis. Each research question was followed by a hypothesis.

1. Do elementary students raised by a single care-giver cope differently than students raised by two care-givers?
2. Can elementary school teachers identify the differing coping strategies of students raised in single care-giver homes?
3. Do elementary school students raised in single care-giver homes display more attention, anxiety, and aggressive behaviors when compared to students raised in a dual care-giver situation?

Table 3 presents the t-test, means and standard deviation scores on attention patterns of students raised by a single or dual care-giver. Results indicate that there was a significant difference between the two groups. The students from single care-giver homes appeared to have more attention problems than those students raised by dual care-givers.

Table 4 displays the anxiety levels of students raised in single and dual care-giver homes. The mean and standard deviation are also included. T-tests for independent means indicated that there was no significant difference between the two groups. This suggests that anxiety may be hard to define or possibly mistaken for other behaviors.

Table 5 displays a comparison of students raised in single and dual care-giver homes in the area of aggressive behaviors. Mean and standard deviation scores are included. Results indicated that there was a significant difference between the two groups. Students from single care-giver homes tended to exhibit more aggressive behaviors than those students from dual care-giver homes.

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Table 6 reflects a one-way ANOVA used to determine the differences between internalized behaviors within the two groups. The results indicated that there was no significant differences in students raised in single and dual care-giver homes.

Table 7 displays a one-way ANOVA administered to see if there was a difference in the externalization of behaviors of students from single care-giver homes. The results indicated there was a significant difference between students from single care-giver and dual care-giver homes.

Summary of Findings

When students from single and dual care-giver homes were compared on their attention patterns students from single care-giver homes were shown to have more attention disorders than those students raised by two care-givers

Both students from single and dual care homes did not significantly differ when their anxiety levels were compared. All students tended to exhibit equal measures of anxety.

On aggression, students from single care-giver homes differed significantly from students raised by dual care-givers. Those students from a single care-giver household tended to display higher degrees of aggressive behaviors. Students from dual care-giver households exhibited less aggressive behaviors in the classroom.

When internalization and externalization of students from single and dual care-giver homes were examined, there was no significant differences found between the two groups in the area of internalization. When the two groups were measured as to externalization of behaviors there was a significant difference in this area.

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Table 1

Demographic Profile of the Students Sampled

Gender	f	%
Male	17	56.67
Female	13	43.33
Total	30	100.00

Table 2

Homes	f	%
Single	15	50.00
Dual	15	50.00
Total	30	100.00

Table 3

T-Test for Attention

Group	M	SD	t-value
Single	14.00	11.34	- 3.47*
Dual	3.07	4.41	-3.47

Note: *P< .05

Table 4

T-Test for Anxiety

Group	M	SD	t-value
Single	4.13	3.36	- 1.35
Dual	2.53	3.14	- 1.35

Table 5

T-Test for Aggression

Group	M	SD	t-value
Single	7.47	9.43	.016*
Dual	1.01	2.19	.021

Note: *P < .05

Table 6

ANOVA for Internalization

Source	SS	df	Ms	F	P
Between	132.30	1	132.30	3.41	.075
Within	1084.66	28	38.73		
Total	1216.96	29			

Table 7

ANOVA for Externalization

Source	SS	df	Ms	F	P
Between	653.33	1	653.33	7.67	.0098*
Within	2384.53	28	85.16		
Total	3037.86	29			

Note: *P < .05